



**NAVAJO NATION
DIVISION OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

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Chapter summit empowers Navajo chapters, provides new ideas



Navajo Nation Division of Community Development Director Arbin Mitchell said Local Governance Act certified chapters often ask what to do next once they attain certification. The chapter summit provided Navajo communities a chance to listen to new ideas and provide feedback from their perspective. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

NAVAJO NATION CHAPTERS converged at the Flagstaff Woodlands Radisson Hotel on August 30 – September 1, 2011 for the Navajo Nation Post Local Governance Act Certification Chapter Summit.

Hosted by the Navajo Nation Division of Community Development, the aim of the chapter summit was to provide LGA certified chapters with a roadmap of what to do next, after attaining certification. It was also an opportunity to hear the concerns of Navajo chapters.

Community Development Director Arbin Mitchell said certified chapters have the opportunity to make a difference in their communities through certified chapter authorities that have not been wholly realized by chapter officials.

“(Certified chapters) ask us, ‘Now that we’ve been certified, what next?’ Hopefully, we can share what we need to next for your people, your community,” Mitchell said.

He explained the purpose behind the summit that feedback from the chapters is essential to the process, rather than utilizing a conference format, where information is only presented and the audience does not have an opportunity to interact with panelists.

“We want to hear your ideas and what you have to say. When you’re in conference mode, the presenters just present their materials,” he said.

Sharing a brief history of the Local Governance Act, Mitchell said the first discussions on decentralization of government authorities

happened in the 1980s, when former Chairman Peterson Zah was in office. What followed was President Albert Hale’s successful bid for Navajo Nation President on the platform of local empowerment.

“In 1998, the Local Governance Act came into existence,” Mitchell said. “It’s been over 12 years this law has been in place.

“But to me, LGA and those working with it are barely on their feet now. We will move forward with it,” he added.

Shonto Chapter was the first chapter to get certified in September 1999. Nahata Dził would be next for certification in August 2002, followed by Cornfields Chapter in May 2003. Five more chapters became certified in 2007 and 2008.

However, the certification process stalled in 2008 and would not pickup again until 2010, when Community Development worked with the Department of Justice, Office of the Auditor General and the Controller’s Office to produce a unified Five Management System manual.

Mitchell said once the manual was produced things moved forward and 12 chapters attained LGA certification in a two-year period.

“Now we have 27 certified chapters. We have five more that are ready to go and by the end of the year, our goal is to have 40 certified chapters. Being certified is all about streamlining,” Mitchell said.

The opening day of the chapter summit featured Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly, Navajo Nation Chief Justice Herb Yazzie and Speaker Johnny Naize. Resources and Development Committee Chairwoman Katherine Benally also addressed the audience, as well as Bureau of Indian Affairs Navajo Area Director Sharon Pinto.

Shelly spoke about fiscal year 2012 and beyond, outlining the future of the Navajo Nation. He said technology is an important part of that future and encouraged chapter officials to not be afraid of the digital age and what it brings to the table.

Chief Justice spoke about the Navajo Nation Judicial Branch and how courts relate to LGA. Yazzie emphasized the courts are an adversarial system of adjudication and encouraged chapters to work things out through peacemaking, a traditional Navajo concept that has been lost through the years.

Naize spoke about the Nabik’iyati’ and the reorganization process for the Navajo Nation Council, which was reduced to 24 members from the previous council of 88 delegates.

Pinto said she was happy to be a part of the summit, especially since the BIA was usually left out of such tribal functions. She shared information about land concerns from both the bureau and chapters on the Navajo Nation.

The remainder of the first day focused on three panel discussions: Post LGA Certification, Alternative Forms of Government, and Contracting, Agreements and Procurement. Hour-long question and answer periods allowed the audience to ask questions about each respective panel and panelists to provide answers and advice.

The second day of the summit featured Arizona Representative Albert Hale (D-District 2), who provided an overview of local empowerment.

Hale said LGA is about empowering Navajo communities and giving the decision making back to the people.

“All of your authorities have been given to the central government and Window Rock,” Hale said to the chapters, speaking in Navajo. “When did this happen and how?”

He said chapters identify problems in their communities and all they can do is point it out to the central government authority and say, “There’s a problem over there. Can you fix it?”

Using the example of graffiti in Chinle, near the hotel for visitors traveling to see Canyon de Chelly, Hale said such blight is not only an eyesore, but evidence of societal problems that could easily be addressed locally.

“Fixing those types of problems at the local level was what local empowerment was about. Local empowerment is nothing more than doing for yourself,” Hale said.

He said Navajo people today are too dependent, the complete antithesis of Navajos thriving before the Long Walk. Hale said Navajos today have the mentality of “sha,” or do this for me.

“Sha. That became our thinking. When did this happen? Let me tell you, in my opinion. We started thinking that way after the Treaty of 1868,” Hale said.

He explained that the treaty outlined boundaries for Navajo land and the federal government stepped in to say, “Let me take care of your housing. Let me take care of your schooling.”

“Since then, we’ve been looking to Washington, D.C. asking, ‘Do this for me.’ It’s still like that today. When I took office, the thinking changed and shifted,” Hale said.

What he wanted to see was an orderly development moving toward local empowerment and reaffirming that power comes from the people, not from Window Rock, not from the Council.

“It all starts with understanding that power is inherent in the people. It doesn’t come from anywhere else other than the people,” Hale said.

Day two concluded with panel discussions on Comprehensive

Land Use Planning, Taxation, Business Site Leases and Home Site Leases, and Non-Profit Organizations, For-Profit Organizations and the Navajo Corporation Code.

LoRenzo Bates, Chairman of the Budget and Finance Committee, kicked off the final day of the summit with discussion on chapter accountability. Bates stressed the importance of honesty and fiscal responsibility.

All five Local Governance Support Centers provided a panel discussion on the Five Management System and answered questions from chapters. The final panel discussion focused on Audits, Legal Representation and Local Ordinances.

The summit accomplished the goal of empowering Navajo chapters with new ideas and tools to utilize at the local level to make a difference in the lives of their community members.

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Arizona Representative Albert Hale said power is inherent in the Navajo people, not in the central government in Window Rock or the Navajo Nation Council. Hale said the premise behind local empowerment is simple: “Do for yourself.” (Photo by Rick Abasta)



Navajo Nation Chief Justice Herb Yazzie attended all three days of the conference and said certified chapters needed to consider the law before developing ordinances for the communities, paying particular attention on the enforcement aspect of any ordinances proposed. Yazzie said chapters need to work with the courts. (Photo by Rick Abasta)